

Testimony in Support of HB 5438 An Act Establishing a Debt Free State College Program.  
February 6, 2023

Good Afternoon Senator Slap, Representative Haddad, Ranking Members Senator Kelly and Representative Haines and Esteemed Members of the Higher Education and Employment Advancement Committee,

My name is Liz Fraser and I am the Policy Director for The Connecticut Association for Human Services. CAHS advances multi-generational policy and program solutions which promote family economic well-being, and foster equitably resourced communities.

I am here today in support of HB 6590 An Act Establishing a Debt Free State College Program. Enactment of this program will enable early childhood educators and employees of nursing homes, some of the lowest paid employees in the state, to have access to debt free higher education. Implemented correctly, this benefit will provide a path to the degrees and certifications necessary to be employed in their field of expertise and to climb a career ladder to better positions. My expertise is in the world of early care and education, so my comments generally apply to the pressing issues surrounding the needs of this population.

Passage of this bill:

- Will encourage colleges and universities to offer early childhood as a course of study
- Will give early care educators the ability to afford to reach their educational goals and work in their chosen field
- Will begin to build a pipeline for degreed early educators to fill our classrooms.

In past years the CGA has passed legislation requiring all early childhood programs funded by the state be of high quality and that each classroom have a bachelor degreed educator, (which is one of the indicators measured by NAEYC). While there has been progress, it has been a difficult goal to reach. State funded programs have not received increases since 2015, making it impossible to offer the compensation necessary to attract and retain staff who have earned a degree.

Current State Funded Program Staff by Credentials and Wages <sup>1</sup>

Credential Category	# in ECE workforce PreK & Inf/Toddler	approximate current wage
< CDA +12	1850	\$14.50
CDA +12 or other	548	\$15.25
AA in ECE	483	\$16.00
BA in ECE	957	\$17.50
	3838	

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<sup>1</sup> Data collected from December 2022 Update of Education Qualifications for Teachers (QSM: Qualified Staff Member) in OEC-Funded Early Childhood Programs and analyzed by The Connecticut Early Childhood Alliance

Recent legislation has pushed the BA requirement out to 2030, so there are seven more years until the law is fully in effect which gives some time to reach this goal. Yet, right now it is hard to convince anyone to pay for a bachelor's degree in a field that pays so little. There are some scholarships, but not enough to support a strong pipeline of early educators - which is needed now. On top of this, many colleges are not offering degreed programs in early childhood because they cannot attract enough students.

The loss of early educators is happening in all types of programs across the state. Experienced teachers, woefully underpaid and many not receiving health insurance, are leaving the field. Many of the teachers with BA's in early education have left for the public schools, and some have left for companies like Amazon, where the pay is much better and there is less stress. Others have simply retired. Data from Office of Early Childhoods QSM report demonstrates the decline in % of staff at state funded programs holding degrees.<sup>2</sup>

A recent survey of child care providers conducted by CAHS tells us that there are approximately 4400 staff vacancies across Connecticut.<sup>3</sup> The inability to hire staff has meant classrooms are closed and an estimated 22,000 children are not able to be enrolled in a program.<sup>4</sup> The industry needs more early care teachers and para professionals, yet finding early educators with the needed credentials is near impossible.

Research shows that increasing staff qualifications can positively impact classroom quality and child outcomes; in a meta-analysis of major, large-scale investigations of child care settings conducted in recent years, researchers identified the significant role of bachelor's degrees in cementing best practices and behaviors among early childhood educators that are consistent with high-quality programming, and in subsequently producing better developmental outcomes for children. A longitudinal study National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accredited and non-accredited centers found that well-educated staff with specialized training in child development, combined with low turnover rates for classroom staff, were related to higher classroom quality in early childhood education and care contexts.<sup>5</sup> Because high quality education in the critical window of early childhood is vitally important for the development and future outcomes of children<sup>6</sup>, early childcare educators should be held to the same standards as our elementary, middle, and high school teachers.

The ability to access affordable college programs is only one piece of the early childhood puzzle. Wages and other compensation will need to become commensurate with other professions requiring a degree, including the public-school educators. Families will need relief from the high costs of early childhood programs. However, this legislation is one step in the right direction, and will certainly help in the effort to have a system of *quality* early care and education which is both equitable and viable.

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<sup>2</sup> Data collected from December 2022 Update of Education Qualifications for Teachers (QSM: Qualified Staff Member) in OEC-Funded Early Childhood Programs

<sup>3</sup> Survey conducted by the Connecticut Association for Human Services, November, 2022. Data available upon request

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Whitebook, M., Sakai, L., Gerber, E. and Howes, C. 2001. Then & now: Changes in child care staffing, 1994–2000, Washington, DC: Center for the Child Care Workforce. (ERIC No. ED452984).

<sup>6</sup> Sawhill, I. V., & Karpilow, Q. (2014). How Much Could We Improve Children's Life Chances by Intervening Early and Often?. *CCF Brief*, 54.

A final point: As this legislation is crafted It is important to remember many of these students will be a nontraditional student who are working low paying jobs while taking classes. In addition to being debt free, on-line learning opportunities and the ability to take classes on a part time basis will be critical to student participation and success.

I would like to end with a quote from an email I received from a program director, who was at her wits end:

*"The ECE Workforce Crisis has caused problems that I never could have imagined and can't seem to solve. Currently, poor staff attendance is just debilitating us. Every day there are 4-8 call outs, on a team of 30! That's a quarter of the staff! Yesterday alone, two staff members didn't return from their lunch breaks - yup, no notice, just didn't return. The new hires are mostly young, inexperienced girls who never would have been considered as candidates pre-covid. The attitude is that they are doing us a favor, each day, just by showing up. And they're right! They are on their phones throughout the day, don't interact with the children, and are very frank when communicating with parents. The quality is just disappearing." October 2022*